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The Effect of Salesperson Stereotype Activation on Consumer Emotional Profiles and Cognition

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ABSTRACT

This study examines stereotypes of salespeople and their impact on consumer emotional responses and information processing in the UK. After a brief theoretical review, the authors present an experimental research design utilizing empirically-developed salesperson profiles in three scenarios. The results indicate that, while stereotype activation appears to result in significantly different emotional profiles in consumers than non-stereotypical encounters, this appears to have little impact on consumer cognition in the UK environment. Some possible reasons for these results are advanced. Finally, managerial and theoretical implications are discussed, and directions for future research proffered.

Keywords:

Stereotypes, Psychology, Sales, Empirical Test.

Track Indication:
Sales Management

Stereotypes of salespeople have provided considerable inspiration to writers, actors, cultural commentators, and various others over the course of the last 100 years. Many of the most compelling and memorable characters in popular culture are salespeople, such as 'Willy Loman' in *Death of A Salesman*, and 'Blake' in *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Even *The Simpsons* has a regular appearance from 'Gill', a downtrodden salesman. Unfortunately, it is difficult to recall a positive representation of a salesperson in the popular media, which may either reflect, or have contributed to, a general lack of regard for salespeople amongst the general public. For example, the Washington Post (December 1, 2003) reported that two of the five least trusted professions in the US were types of salespeople, and sales practitioner-oriented publications commonly explore the outcomes of salesperson stereotypes (e.g. Trumfio 1994; Young 2003; Zurier 1991). In fact, the term 'selling' is an insult in some social groups (Butler 1996).

Negative stereotypes of salespeople can have important effects on a number of levels. They may influence the types of people who wish to take up a career in sales, either reducing the amount of high-quality applicants (e.g. DelVecchio and Honeycutt 2002), or perpetuating a vicious circle by attracting those who wish to conform to the stereotype. They may also have an influence on salespeople's well-being within the workplace. Constant reminders of the low regard in which society holds one can only be partially compensated by the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards of the job. They may effect sales performance as well, by influencing the way consumers react to salespeople. However, there is some debate as to whether salespeople who act in accordance with a stereotype are likely to perform better or worse than those who do not. In particular, Babin, Boles and Darden (1995) show how it is unclear whether behaving in accordance with a stereotype will lead to a higher level of product-related information processing by consumers than behaving at odds.

While we have some anecdotal and journalistic evidence regarding salesperson stereotypes (e.g. Falvey 1995; Tobias 1987; Zeiger 1995), there is little empirical work which approaches the issue from a psychologically-informed perspective. While we can say with some confidence that in general the stereotype of a salesperson seems to be unflattering (Thompson 1972), there is little rigorous empirical research available which explores the exact content of these stereotypes, and their effects. Furthermore, what little scholarly research that is available has been conducted in the US (e.g. Babin, Boles and Darden 1995; Stafford, Leigh and Martin 1995). Yet it is by no means certain that stereotypes of salespeople are consistent across cultures, and in fact stereotypes are inextricably intertwined with their cultural context (e.g. McGarty, Yzerbyt and Spears 2002). Different stereotypes may then lead to different outcomes across cultures. For example, research has found that stereotypes of the elderly are considerably more positive in China than the US, and that the prevalence of a negative stereotype in the US may actually influence biological outcomes such as memory loss among US elderly (Levy and Langer 1994).

The primary objective of this study is to determine the effects of salesperson stereotypes on the information processing of consumers in the UK. We utilize the method of Anderson and Klatzky (1987) to develop stereotype descriptors, which has been used in the US by Babin, Boles and Darden (1995). We then use these stereotype descriptors in a scenario-based experimental design to explore their effects on consumer information processing.

STEREOTYPES AND INFORMATION PROCESSING

Stereotypes can be defined as the cognitive component of prejudice (Aronson, Wilson and Akert 2004), and while they may have undesirable connotations, they are a fundamental part of how we understand the social world (Fiske 2004). Stereotypes help individuals establish expectations of others' behaviour through their membership of given groups. It is simply impossible to build completely new impressions of every individual one meets, so stereotypes provide an important cognitive economising function. Stereotypes strengthen intra-group cohesion by emphasizing inter-group differences (Fiske 2004), and help individuals maintain control in new and potentially threatening social encounters (such as a sales call).

However, stereotypes are strongly culture-bound, as we acquire much of our stereotypical knowledge during childhood (Tajfel 1982). As well as parental influence, young people assimilate norms such as stereotypes as they learn to be accepted members of their society, and Pettigrew (1958) demonstrated the key importance of culture when he showed how stereotypes changed when individuals moved to different locations. These stereotypes are often transmitted very powerfully by the media (e.g. Hogg and Vaughan 2002), which reinforces and reifies culturally accepted images of groups.

Stereotypes are likely to have an influence on consumer behavior during a sales interaction in a number of ways. In essence, shared stereotypes ease social interaction, as long as individuals all behave in ways consistent with stereotypical expectations. In particular, stereotypes reduce the cognitive workload of those interacting by easing the need for the brain to process all pieces of information about an individual and freeing up processing power for other aspects of an interaction. In a salesperson-customer interaction this can be a possible advantage. For example, if the consumer has more processing power available to assess the product in question, rather than the salesperson, this should lead to an enhanced ability to recall product features and other relevant information. Conversely, if a salesperson does not act in accordance with a stereotype, theory would suggest that – all other things remaining equal – the consumer must expend more of their information processing abilities on interpreting the social interaction, leaving less available for product-related information:

H_{1a}: The activation of a typical salesperson stereotype will lead to a greater level of product-related analytic processing compared to an atypical salesperson.

However, a contrasting viewpoint is that the presence of stereotypes may lead to a suppression of cognitive activity, as individuals fall back on heuristic information processing routines instead of using analytic processing (e.g. Britton and Tesser 1982). Thus, consumers in a sales situation may evaluate *all* information heuristically rather than analytically when faced with a stereotypical salesperson. Babin, Boles and Darden (1995), in their US sales-focused study, were unable to conclusively determine which of these opposed theories was in operation, thus we also provide an alternative hypothesis:

H_{1b}: The activation of a typical salesperson stereotype will lead to a lower level of product-related analytic processing compared to an atypical salesperson.

Consumer emotions are also likely to be of import. Prior research – both outside sales and within – has found that activation of different stereotypes leads to varying emotional profiles experienced by the individual (e.g. Babin, Boles and Darden 1995; Fiske 1982). It seems likely that the activation of emotions may mediate between the environment, and the ultimate cognitive response (Babin, Darden and Griffin 1992). Thus, in a sales

situation the impact of a typical salesperson stereotype on greater product information processing (i.e. H_1) may be overridden by negative emotions produced by the stereotype. Babin, Boles and Darden (1995) do indeed find a significant mediating influence of emotions between sales stereotype activation and consumer information processing, which may help explain the conflicting arguments regarding the effect of stereotypes reported above. This leads us to our final hypotheses:

H₂: Consumer emotions will vary systematically according to the type of salesperson encountered (e.g. whether they adhere to a stereotype or not)

H₃: Consumer emotions will mediate the relationship between stereotype activation and consumer information processing.

RESEARCH METHOD

Virtually all previous research on salesperson stereotypes and their influence has been conducted in the US. Yet, the influence of culture on stereotypes and their effects is well accepted. To explore the influence of salesperson stereotypes on consumer cognitions in the UK we utilise the method of Babin, Boles, and Darden (1995), which is based firstly on the stereotype creation method of Anderson and Klatzky (1987). In brief, this consists of two stages of research, which we conducted using 110 UK postgraduates (qualitative research with 43, then quantitative with 67), resulting in a collection of 'most associated characteristics' about salespeople. After this stage, we were left with the raw material to create two typical salesperson stereotypes (one more general, and one 'pushy'), and an 'atypical' description for comparative purposes (see Appendix 1). We also utilised the data from this stage to determine the emotions which were most commonly felt in UK sales situations. Following this we devised a scenario-based experiment using a car-sales scenario (see Appendix 2). Subjects were 120 UK undergraduates, randomly assigned to one of the three stereotype conditions. Subjects read the scenario, and were given a brief distractor task. Following this they were asked to list their recall of both the salesperson characteristics and the car characteristics. Subsequently, a brief questionnaire containing the emotional measures was administered. Finally, subjects were debriefed.

The dependent variable was the ratio of car characteristics versus salesperson characteristics recalled, a measure of cognitive response to the situation. Higher scores indicate higher levels of analytic processing, with 1.0 equalling an equal ratio. Emotions found relevant in the first stage of the research were skepticism, helplessness, arousal, joy and satisfaction. The former three are the same as those uncovered by Babin, Boles and Darden (1995), but the latter two are unique to the present UK-based research. These emotions were measured using standard emotion measurement inventories (e.g. Holbrook and Batra 1988).

In order to check perceptions of the stereotypes, we ran a manipulation check. Subjects should rate the 'typical' and 'pushy' scenarios as more representative of a salesperson than the 'atypical' one. The results of an ANOVA suggested exactly this, with the mean typicality of the 'typical' and 'pushy' stereotypes significantly higher than the 'atypical' one ($F=11.68, p<0.05$).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

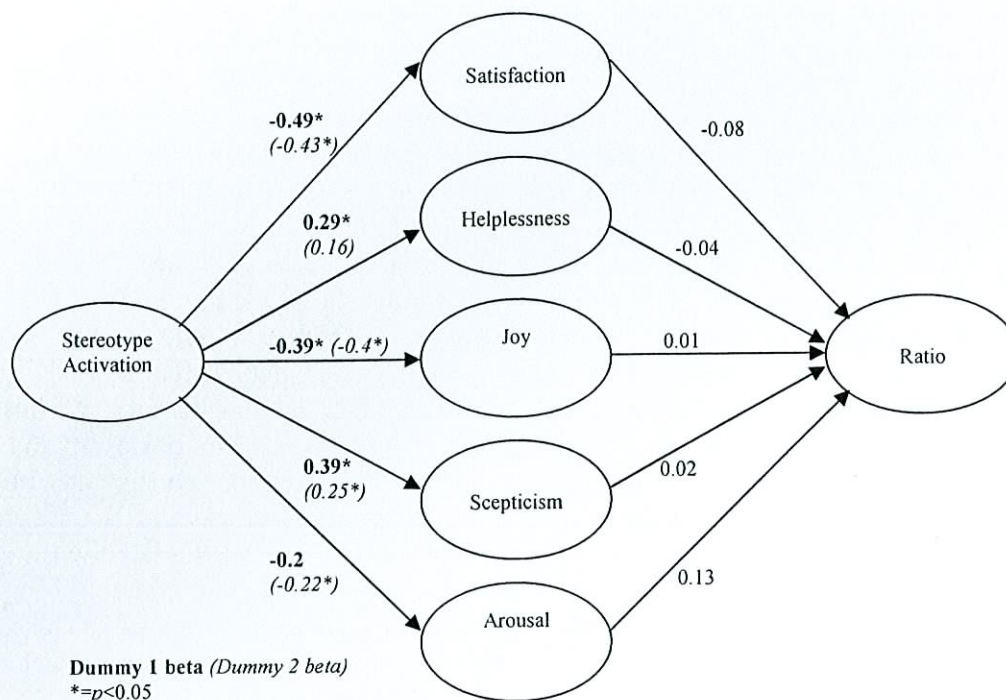
We first examined hypotheses 1a and 1b, using the ratio measure to represent the degree of product-related analytical processing from the subject. H1a predicted that stereotypical

salespeople will elicit greater analytic processing due to a cognitive economising effect, whereas H1b predicts the opposite due to an increase in heuristic processing styles. The results of an ANOVA comparing mean ratio across treatment levels was insignificant ($F=0.87, p>0.05$). This is consistent with prior US-based work, which has also been unable to conclusively determine whether stereotypes have a positive or negative influence on analytic processing (e.g. Babin, Boles and Darden 1995). Interestingly, the descriptive results indicated the highest ratio was recalled under the 'typical' condition (0.87), with the lowest recalled under the 'pushy' condition (0.81), and the 'atypical' condition between them (mean of 0.83). This pattern is interesting, in that it partly supports H1a, with the highest ratio being recalled under the 'typical' condition suggesting a cognitive economising effect. However, the fact that the mean ratio was virtually identical for the 'atypical' and 'pushy' conditions is inconsistent with H1a, as the 'pushy' condition was defined earlier as another form of typical stereotype. These results are slightly different from earlier – US-based – work (e.g. Babin, Boles and Darden 1995; Sujan, Bettman and Sujan 1987), in that they are more consistent with the cognitive economising theory, than the heuristic theory.

To test H2, regarding whether the different scenarios were associated with different emotional profiles, a MANOVA predicting subjects' joy, satisfaction, scepticism, helplessness, and arousal over the different treatments was tested. This supported H2 ($F=4.31, p<0.05$). Individual ANOVAs comparing the means of each emotion across treatments were also all significant (lowest F was for arousal, at $F=3.55, p<0.05$). Comparing the cell means results in an emotional profile for each salesperson type. The 'typical' salesperson elicited high levels of scepticism and helplessness, but low levels of satisfaction, joy, and arousal. The 'pushy' description was remarkably similar in terms of emotional profile, but with even lower satisfaction and joy, and higher levels of scepticism. Helplessness and arousal were very similar to the 'typical' description. The 'atypical' treatment exhibited a considerably different profile, with higher levels of satisfaction, joy, and arousal, and lower levels of scepticism and helplessness. These results are consistent in general with prior work (e.g. Babin, Boles and Darden 1995). However, the addition of joy and satisfaction to the present profile extends our understanding of how consumers react emotionally to salespeople.

Finally, to test H3, a path analysis was performed using multiple regression (Baron and Kenny 1986; e.g. Babin, Boles and Darden 1995). Two dummy variables were used to represent the three-level categorical independent treatment variable (Kleinbaum et al. 1998). One dummy coded the 'pushy' treatment as 1 and the others as 0, while a second dummy coded the 'typical' as 1 and the others as 0. We first regressed the dependent ratio variable on the dummy variables. Unfortunately, none of the dummy variables proved to be a significant predictor of ratio. Figure 1 shows the results of the series of regression models used to test H3. Unsurprisingly given the results of the H2 test, stereotype activation predicts emotions well. However, it is interesting to see that emotions appear to have little effect on ratio. As a result, the mediation effect posited in H3 can not be supported. This result contradicts the findings of Babin, Boles and Darden (1995), who found a mediating influence of arousal and helplessness on ratio (i.e. analytic processing).

FIGURE 1: PATH ANALYSIS OF EMOTIONAL MEDIATION



CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of this UK-based study both support and contradict earlier US-based work in the same area. It is clear that stereotype activation is associated with very different emotional profiles, with typical salesperson stereotypes being associated with what appears to be a highly negative emotional profile, compared with a more atypical stereotype. Our work extends understanding by including more emotions, and particularly satisfaction. That this pattern is evident even across the cultural divide between the US and UK provides some food for thought for marketers and scholars. However, our results supported the cognitive economising theory more than the heuristic processing theory, which is the opposite to US results. This could be a result of cultural differences, but it seems more likely that further research is needed into how we process information in reality. Recent advances in neuroscience may be of considerable interest here (e.g. Senior and Rippon, forthcoming). Finally, we found no support for the idea that emotions mediate the influence of stereotypes on analytic processing, again in contradiction to prior work. Even more surprising was the finding that emotions did not seem to have a direct impact on analytic processing at all. Our design and measures are both well accepted, so it seems unlikely that they caused a problem, nor do we have any reason to expect the sampling to have been an issue. It may be that modern consumers are more experienced in evaluating product information in general, and thus emotions caused by interpersonal interactions are set aside in the product evaluation stage. UK consumers may also be more accepting of such emotions in a sales encounter, and therefore they have little influence on information processing. What is certain is that further research is needed into these questions, in order that we are better able to understand the complex relationship between interpersonal interactions and information processing in the sales encounter.

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APPENDIX 1: SCENARIOS

Typical-Salesperson Description.

You have decided to begin shopping for a new car. The model you are most interested in is the 2004 Volkswagen-Golf. Because you are free over the weekend, you decide to go to a dealership and take a closer look at the Golf.

On arriving at the dealership, you are approached by an employee. He is approximately aged between 35 – 45. He introduces himself as Dave and gives you a business card pointing out his personal number. Dave is in good shape and although not overly attractive he appears to take good care of himself and his appearance. He is dressed in an expensive suit, with a fitted shirt and a stylish tie.

He shakes your hand and comments "What can I help you with today?"

To which you reply "Mostly, I'm just looking."

Dave continues with a fast pace to his voice, "Well I've got some great deals on the Boras and on the Passats, and as you know these are both great cars at a great price!"

You say, "Could you please point me in the direction of the New Golfs?"

Dave remains with you whilst he walks you over to the Golfs. He points out various product related features about other cars en-route such as engine size, brake horse power, safety standards and engine efficiency. He seems to know a lot about cars.

You reach the Golf and start looking at it. Some of the options on this car include air conditioning, antilock brakes, a CD player as standard, automatic locks, power steering and 16" alloy wheels. The price on the window is £16,000. Dave points out that the car also has a drivers and passengers air bag, a three year limited warranty, a rustproof coat, and has been "prepped".

You begin to leave by saying you need to look around. Dave looks rather irritable that no sale has been made, but still smiles and replies, "Remember if you come back tomorrow I may not be able to give you the same deal. Anyway, don't wait too long in deciding, this is a great car and very popular – in fact I have another client coming to view this car later today!"

Pushy-Salesperson Description.

You have decided to begin shopping for a new car. The model you are most interested in is the 2004 Volkswagen-Golf. Because you are free over the weekend, you decide to go to a dealership and take a closer look at the Golf.

On arriving at the dealership, you are immediately approached by an employee. He is approximately aged between 25 – 35. He introduces himself as Dave and gives you a business card pointing out his personal number. Dave is in good shape and although not overly attractive he appears to take good care of himself and his appearance. He is dressed in an expensive (although perhaps a little 'flashy') suit, with a fitted shirt and a stylish tie, he is also wearing a designer pair of shoes.

He shakes your hand and comments, "What car can I help you with today?"

You reply, "I am mostly just looking."

Dave continues with his usual loud and fast pace to his voice, "Well I've got some great deals on the Boras and on the Passats, and as you know these are both great cars at a great price!"

You say, "Could you please point me in the direction of the New Golfs?"

Dave remains in close attendance whilst he walks you over to the Golfs. He points out various product related features about other cars en-route such as engine size, brake horse power, safety standards and engine efficiency. He seems to know a lot about cars.

You reach the Golf and start looking at it. Some of the options on this car include air conditioning, antilock brakes, a CD player as standard, automatic locks, power steering and 16" alloy wheels. The price on the window is £16,000. Dave points out on several occasions all of the above features and that the car also has a drivers and passengers air bag, a three year limited warranty, a rustproof coat, and has been "prepped". He also points out lots of other features (including the finance package he could offer you), which at this point are irrelevant since you have not committed to the sale.

You begin to leave by saying you need to look around. Dave is clearly quite irritated that no sale has been made, but still smiles and replies, "If you leave I wont be able to give you as good a deal when you come back, and you'll have to anyway, since you wont find a better deal at a better price any place, or any time!"

Atypical-Salesperson Description.

You have decided to begin shopping for a new car. The model you are most interested in is the 2004 Volkswagen-Golf. Because you are free over the weekend, you decide to go to a dealership and take a closer look at the Golf.

Upon arriving at the dealership you are left to browse amongst the various models of cars. After a few minutes an employee walks over to you, introduces himself as Dave and offers you a business card. Dave is relatively young, possibly aged between 20 and 25. Although over weight, Dave is still relatively attractive. He is dressed in a suit that looks as if it was quite cheap, a white shirt and a rather garish tie. As you meet him he shakes your hand warmly.

He comments, with a gentle pace to his voice, "Have a look around and if you need any assistance I'll just be in the office."

Before he leaves you ask, "Could you please point me in the direction of the New Golfs?"

"They're right over there on the other side of the lot, next to the Passats and Polos, If you like I can walk you over to them". You walk over to the Golfs together, quietly making smalltalk.

You reach the Golf and start looking at it. Some of the options on this car include air conditioning, antilock brakes, a CD player as standard, automatic locks, power steering and 16" alloy wheels. The price on the window is £16,000. Upon asking Dave a few questions you discover that the car has a driver's and passenger's air bag, a three year limited warranty, a rustproof coat, and has been "prepped".

You begin to leave by saying you need to look around. Dave replies saying, "I understand, buying a car is an important decision and you need to find the car and deal that is best for you. Feel free to come back if there is anything I can help you with. Enjoy the rest of your day."